'Trash Lady' Tianen Helps Baghdadis Clean Up Their Town

Contributed by Mike Tharp
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Meet the Trash Lady of Baghdad.

A/k/a The Rubble and Demolition Lady. A/k/a “Trash and Trouble” by Australian troops in Iraq. A/k/a Susan Tianen, District safety officer, who, during four months in Baghdad, was shot at three times, saw a Division colleague wounded in an ambush, lost her closest Iraqi counterpart to assassins and recoiled from negative stories about her work in two major newspapers.

She also ramped up the capital city’s most efficient sanitary system in decades, deploying everything from donkey carts to satellite photos to clean up a mess symbolized by a six-story-high garbage pile. She began a rubble removal and building demolition program that ultimately brought her to the smoldering ruins of the suicide-bombed United Nations headquarters. She compiled a CD of haunting images of Iraqi children, which was shown at the international donors’ conference in Spain. “The load we carried was really, really, really heavy,” she recalls, “and you are 100% dependent on your team, your interpreter, your buddies, your soldiers.”

Tianen, whose safety officer resume includes dealing with hazardous waste and industrial material, was stunned when she arrived in Baghdad. Not so much at the savage ravages of war as at the disconnect among many Iraqis on how their garbage could make them sick. “There was no connection between disease, infant mortality rates and sanitation,” she says. “They didn’t have the educational background and information telling them that you don’t slaughter your livestock next to where you sell produce.”

Ranging out into the unsettled city five days a week, Tianen first attacked the trash issue as if it were a math problem. What’s the population of Baghdad and how much trash is generated? Around 5 million and 22,113 tons a week, respectively, including the airport, central souk and prisons. How much to haul it away? That calculated out to 1,460 vehicles making 4,290 trips a week to the dump.

Which dump? Throughout the Saddam era, the main dump was 20 miles northeast of Baghdad, in a landfill purposely planted above a water table used for drinking by the local Shiite population. (The old regime favored Sunnis at the expense of Shiites.) The landfill at what was once called Saddam City (now Sadr City) contaminated the Shiites’ water, but it also provided jobs and resources for 150,000 people, Tianen says.

Tons of trash never made it to any dump. Tianen saw one pile stacked six stories high in a narrow suburban lane; had it been removed, the walls next to it would have collapsed because it had become part of the housing structure. For decades, residents simply tossed their garbage outside their front doors; apartment-dwellers used their windows. Richer families who tipped civil servants got an occasional pickup; the poor didn’t. “When trash took over, there was no place for the kids to play, no soccer fields, and you even got used to the smell,” Tianen says.

She wanted to move the dump from the Shiites’ home turf, so she reached back to the Mississippi Valley District for satellite images of what places were available and acceptable.

Once she picked a new site, Tianen conferred with the mayor and governing council, and the mayoralty hired a director-general of landfills and nine directors of sanitation to correspond to Baghdad’s nine baladiya, or sectors. She handed out maps of their areas of responsibility—a bold move since Saddam had removed all maps from universities and most ministries.

Then came, to paraphrase “Catch 22,” The Great Big Map Problem of Baghdad. Unfamiliar with their hometown’s geography as scanned from hundreds of miles up, the newly appointed sanitation satraps were dumbfounded. No, that’s not my city, cried one. You don’t know what you’re talking about, shouted another. They also argued over the size of the maps, so Tianen went back to the cartographers and had them make every map the same size, color and scale.

The Baghdadis then complained that the maps didn’t show any landmarks they could identify, so Tianen had military mappers include mosques, parks, fountains and other features in their zones. “Everybody went running out to confirm,” she recalls. “So we finally came up with maps we could communicate with them about.”

After maps came rules. Anyone caught dumping in another’s territory had his vehicle confiscated for a day. All vehicles had to be named and numbered so they wouldn’t be hired elsewhere for double-dip pay. Vehicles included back loaders and dump trucks, of course, but also wheelbarrows and donkey carts to negotiate burka-wide alleys.

Her blueprint needed office backup. The new Iraqi trashnocrats had never laid out a budget, hadn’t used a checkbook, didn’t know what line-items were. Tianen had to tutor them in basic accounting which, among other things, forbids tipping—the baksheesh so common in Middle Eastern commerce.

Security worries meant that maneuver units had to accompany garbage men. A military officer mentored each sanitation engineer, who mirrored them for a month. Then the military backed away. Inevitably, with such a brand-new system, there were problems. One district’s efforts folded, others wobbled. Eventually, however, all the baladiya were fully operational with little oversight.

Before long, 200,000 day laborers were hired at $3 a day, $11 million total for Baghdad’s cleanup program. By the time Tianen was ready to move onto her next mission—removing rubble and demolished buildings—Sadr City was the cleanest it had been in 10 years. “We needed to get money out in the communities,” she explains. “We had to get them to start taking ownership of this.”

The improvement didn’t impress everybody. “The cleanup has also provided new opportunities for corruption and child labor,” the Los Angeles Times reported. “Families desperate to obtain the $3 daily salary are sending tykes out in the street to join the garbage brigade,” said the Washington Post.

Stung by the criticism, Tianen has reacted strongly. She insisted that the Iraqis comply with an age limit of 15, and since there was no minimum wage, $3 a day was a windfall for the poor. She had no idea that “mafia-type behavior” would lead to falsification of age and other records; plus it was tough to audit records in Arabic, and some workers couldn’t even write their names. Moreover, school was out so boys were free to do the work, which girls and women weren’t allowed to do. “Do you want to employ the kid, whose mother is a war widow and in desperate need of money?” Tianen asks rhetorically. “You can’t balance that against standards in America,” adding that many youth organizations join cleanup campaigns in the U.S.

Harsh newspaper critiques paled compared to being shot at three times. The first time, in a convoy, one of her personal security detail (PSD) yelled, “Susan, down!” She did then, but hadn’t become “situationally aware” when the second incident occurred; as a result she was thrown to the ground by her PSD. “The third time I still had my PSD and I felt I was OK,” she remembers.

Then, because only diplomats and general officers were authorized to have a military PSD, Tianen’s guardians were transferred—one went to the Navy Seals. She refused to go out on her own. “Even if I had been given a gun, I wouldn’t have used it,” she asserts. “I don’t value my life above anyone else’s life. But I would pick up one and use it in defense of one of my team members and soldiers.”

Without an armed escort, Tianen didn’t venture out for three days. Then her PSD was restored, but at some cost to her reputation. “I wasn’t being ‘obstinate’ and I didn’t think I was better than anyone else,” she insists. “I was just scared. I was willing to do my job, but I needed some level of security so I’d feel safe.”

Her concerns were well-founded. Shortly after she returned to the U.S., she learned that her friend and confidant, Baghdad Deputy Mayor Faris Abdul Razaq al-Assam, was shot dead outside his home by unknown assassins. Tianen had gotten to know him well, visiting his home several times where she met his wife and family. She had given him her photo CD titled “Uncommon Life” to take to the donors’ conference in Spain. “He would probably have been the first elected president of Iraq,” she says wistfully. “He showed the Coalition the heart of an Iraqi, what the people of Iraq could aspire to be.”

Tianen views Iraq and Iraqis through a prism of hope and doubt. Hope rests with the young. “The kids are going to be the beneficiaries, not the adults,” she says. “The kids saw something they’ll never see again—the American spirit! Every 18-year-old soldier there who interacts with one child makes a huge difference. I don’t think that child will be planting a bomb.”

Her doubt pivots on the question of how long the military and civilian coalition stays in the country. “(The Iraqis) are very afraid that we’re going to leave,” she says. “Being a socialist country, there’s no incentive for them to work on a timetable. It’s not going to go as fast as America wants because they don’t have the same goal—the Iraqis don’t want the Americans to leave.”

As for Tianen herself? “I’d go back,” she says. “But my family doesn’t want me to.

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